

Working in concert

The design of a new performance hall needed to add capacity while retaining the original character, balancing technology and sympathetic styling

Since the 1985 opening of the iconic Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, audiences have flocked to its offerings – theater, dance, music and family events – fulfilling the dream of the late Saint Paul, Minnesota benefactor Sally Ordway Irvine, to provide a place “for lots of music. No – lots of everything, and for everybody!”

Situated along the perimeter of downtown Saint Paul’s historic Rice Park, the Ordway, with its Beaux Arts glass and copper exterior, serves as a luminous magnet for patrons and visitors to the city. Its original 1,900-seat Music Theater and 300-seat McKnight Theatre became home to four treasured Minnesota arts organizations: The Ordway, The Schubert Club, The Minnesota Opera and The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra.

Ordway architect Ben Thompson’s original vision included a 1,000-seat concert hall with a lobby enclosed in a glass curtain wall that extended around the corner of the building. Due to a lack of funds, the 300-seat McKnight Theatre, which has no exterior presence, was built instead. This venue suited small productions, but was insufficient for much of the four primary tenants’ programming. Over time, scheduling became an increasingly contentious and untenable situation.

In 2005, concerned community leaders gathered the four organizations to solve the problem. The resulting Arts Partnership, a joint governing organization, successfully solved immediate challenges and helped leverage funding for an expansion.

In 2007, the Arts Partnership called on designer Tim Carl of HGA Architects & Engineers to create an initial design. The goal was to create a 1,100-seat concert hall to replace the under-utilized McKnight Theatre, and retain what the community loved about the building – in particular its stunning, reflective façade. Carl returned two weeks later with a sketch that, unbeknown to him, eerily echoed Ben Thompson’s original design and resonated with the Arts Partnership.

In addition to the concert hall, HGA designed a three-story support space adjacent to the existing building. The project would add a total of 57,000ft², with renovations to an additional 18,000ft², at a total project cost of US\$39m.

Heading up

To replace a 300-seat black box with a 1,100-seat concert hall, with virtually no room to expand the footprint, the only way to go is up.

“The building could only expand 10ft to the north and 20ft to the east, so we raised the roof of the concert hall 30ft and expanded the lobby with a glass cantilevered space that hovers above the sidewalk on the corner of the building,” says HGA’s Carl.

The design team – architects and engineers from HGA, theater planners and lighting designers from Schuler Shook, and acousticians from Akustiks – had to work hand-in-hand, as seemingly every inch of expansion was debated. Their flexibility was crucial to collectively producing the perfect blend of technical acuity and aesthetics.

Project designer Michael Burgoyne of Schuler Shook says, “Inches not absolutely required for the building envelope were given to seating and circulation. Chair widths, row spacing and aisle circulation were carefully considered, but always with the goal of maximizing capacity. There was no room for deviation.”

“Not only did it have to fit,” says Carl, “but it had to be beautiful, inspiring, comfortable, and

Photos: Paul Crosby Photography

DESIGN



sound perfect. The final design was completely unique because of our partners' willingness to balance it all."

Creating connections

The concert hall delivers an acoustically magnificent experience for audiences and performers, with a sound that exudes the warmth, resonance and clarity needed for chamber, recital and small ensemble music. Likewise, the interior's intimate setting fosters an engaged connection between artist and audience. With three levels of seating, no seat is more than 90ft from the stage. A choral loft hovers at the back of the stage, seating up to 117 choir or audience members.

The spectacular sweeping ceiling, made of over 14.7 linear miles of oak dowels, visually envelops the stage and the audience, and ensures acoustic qualities specifically designed for the sounds of natural instruments. Hidden behind the structure are catwalks that support theatrical infrastructure and acoustic curtains that can be drawn to enhance percussive or amplified programming as needed. Within the walls, a technological infrastructure makes the hall multimedia-ready, able to accept current and future technology.

According to Schuler Shook principal designer Michael DiBlasi, a full-scale mock-up of the ceiling system created at the fabricator's shop "was extraordinary. It allowed us to evaluate the construction of the system behind it, the integration of theatrical and architectural lighting, and to ensure superior aesthetic and acoustic functions."

The hall's white walls are sculpted with abstract shapes made from more than 1,100 glass fiber reinforced gypsum acoustic panels. "They're designed like abstract fluted columns," says Carl, "and their placement,

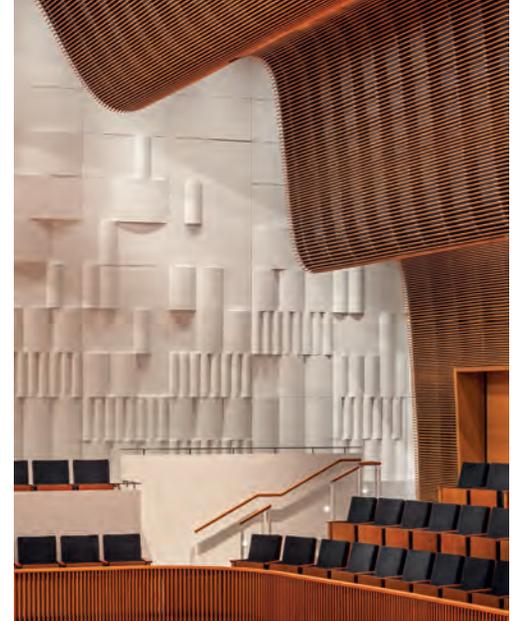


Top left: The 1,110-seat concert hall replaces the previous, 300-seat black box theater

Top right: The walls feature more than 1,100 glass fiber reinforced gypsum panels

Above: The seating design, and its impact on acoustics, was also carefully considered

Below: The building's lobby extension connects with the venue's original entrance



although it may look random, is actually completely driven by acoustics." Each panel – there are 10 different designs – was specifically created in close consultation with Paul Scarbrough of Akustiks.

Seamless transition

The extension of the lobby seamlessly connects with the original, beautifully orchestrated entrance. Custom-colored brick and chemically aged copper match the aged patina of the existing exterior and the curtain wall's rhythm of undulating windows now wraps around the corner of the building, giving the Ordway a dramatic new presence on the corner of a main thoroughfare with incredible views of the city.

HGA and Schuler Shook worked closely to ensure a sympathetic aesthetic between the new and existing lobby interiors, but imprinted the new spaces with more contemporary elements. As DiBlasi notes, "The original fluted glass chandeliers, sconces and brass fixtures are beautiful, but to modernize, we shifted to wall washing and random down-lights, making it as simple and clean as possible without shunning the existing design."

Audiences enthusiastically cite the hall's vibrant sound and intimacy. Musicians refer to the hall like another instrument with its tremendous expressive possibilities and dynamism. *The New York Times* described it as "acoustically ideal." The Arts Partnership and its supporters are both ecstatic and energized by future programming possibilities, which will truly fulfill Sally Ordway Irvine's vision of a place that creates "lots of everything, and for everybody!" ■

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